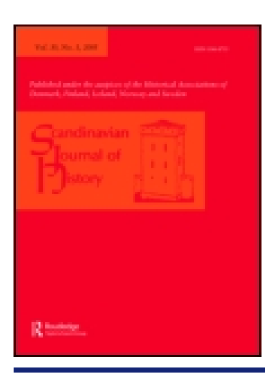




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Historical Narrative as Collective Therapy: the Case of the Turkish Raid in Iceland

Þorsteinn Helgason

A single, terrifying event shook the population of Iceland in 1627 with an aftermath that was felt in the years and centuries to come. For several days groups of well-trained corsairs raided the coastal regions in the east and the south, killing dozens of people and capturing around 400 to be sold in slavery in North Africa and, possibly, ransomed later.

The Icelanders wrote voluminous historical narratives about the Raid, the "tale of great tidings" as they called them.[1] They did so in order to put an unbearable event into context and to draw the right lessons from it. One writes because that is what educated people do in a literate society like the Icelandic one, in order to cope with the world. Historical narrative becomes collective therapy and a confirmation of one's presence and existence. I narrate, therefore I am. But "I am" in splendid isolation. The tales of this insular trauma were not to be exported in Latin for learned circles. They were written by hand and copied by hand in numerous examples to be read aloud only where the Icelandic language was understood. The wonderful invention of the printing press was too expensive, and not even appropriate or neccessary, for an insular drama.

1. The course of events

In the summer of 1627, corsairs (pirates) from the Barbary States of North Africa raided the coastal regions of Iceland. One group from Sallee, Morocco, attacked the fishing community of Grindavík in the southwest, captured 15 people together with the crew of two Danish merchant vessels and killed two farmers. Then they headed for Bessastaðir, the residence of the Danish governor where some prominent people were gathered at that moment. One of the corsairs' ships became stranded, however, and for some reason they gave up further advances and left for Morocco. The other group of corsairs, originating in Algiers, first raided the

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[1] The historiography of the Turkish Raid in Iceland has been dealt with in my thesis, Þorsteinn Helgason, "Stórtíðinda frásögn. Heimildir og sagnaritun um Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi árið 1627," University of Iceland (1996).

southeastern coast, captured 110 people and killed nine. From there they headed for the Westman Islands, under the guidance of some English fishermen they had picked up on their way. In the islands they had a free rein for three days before finally departing with 242 captives and leaving more than 30 dead behind them. All in all the corsairs captured about 400 people and took four Danish freighters together with dried fish, silver and other valuables.

On arriving in Sallee and Algiers the captives were sold into slavery but the Reverend Ólafur Egilsson of the Westman Islands was soon released and sent back to Copenhagen and Iceland to collect a ransom. He found a penniless king in Copenhagen, beaten by Wallenstein's army. Nevertheless, money was collected and a group of 34 Icelanders eventually were ransomed in 1636 along with other Scandinavians. Some were bought back later or managed to free themselves in one way or another, before or after this date.

A list made by Icelanders in Algiers in 1635 counted 70 adults who were still "in faith and good conscience and alive". Almost all the young people "turned Turk", i.e. took the Islamic faith, and some gained prominent positions, or at least had some strange experiences, in the new society. To name an example, a servant from the Reverend Ólafur's household, a pretty young woman,was sold twice at a high price and finally to a rich man who bought her for an even richer Christian customer in Jerusalem. The pastor noted the cleanliness and the bountiful nature of Barbary compared with the harsh way of life in his native land. "They enjoy their blissfullness hither", he commented.

At the moment of the Turkish Raid, England and Holland had renewed their hostilities towards imperial Spain. They needed allies in their struggle and Algiers and Morocco were among them. The Barbary States had a very mixed population, with European converts as prominent members of the corsair communities. The leader of the Sallee group who raided Grindavík, and probably of the whole expedition, was Admiral Mourad Reis, alias Jan Jansz from Haarlem, The Netherlands.

2. In collective memory

In Iceland "the Turkish Raid" is very well known. When Turkey and Iceland played football in 1995 the headlines in a full-page advertisement in the biggest newspaper ran, "Don't let the Turks ravish us again!"[2] This you can only do when the event is part of the collective memory.

The accounts of the raid circulated around the country through the centuries in numerous handwritten copies. Printing of the sources had to wait until the 19th and 20th centuries. In 1960 a new popular narrative about the Raid had a wide circulation and was reprinted. In the Westman Islands; of course, the Raid was held in vivid memory where fear of the "Turks" lingered long. Until the late 18th century every household had to provide able men to keep watch on the mountain of *Helgafell* each night during summer in order to ensure that they observed "any

[2] "...látum Tyrkina ekki ræna okkur aftur". *Morgunblaðið*, Oct. 8 and 11 (1995).

likelihood of disturbances, cannons being shot from vessels or boats being rowed from them towards land..."[3]

It may be that the volcanic eruption of 1973, when the whole population of the islands had to be evacuated, has added another disaster to the collective memory of the inhabitants. This time, there were no casualties although a great many of the islanders were uprooted, albeit in circumstances very different from those in 1627.

In recent years there has been an even greater interest in the Turkish Raid. Film projects dealing with this event, both documentary and fictional, are in preparation. At least two documentary novels will be published before long. A play about *Guðríður Símonardóttir*, the best known of the returnees, was published and staged in *Hallgrímskirkja* in 1995.[4] This church, the biggest one in Iceland, is named after *Hallgrímur Pétursson*, who as a young man in Copenhagen was hired as preacher to the returning captives. To Guðríður, 17 years his senior, he became a soulmate; they got married in Iceland and he became a prominent and beloved psalmist. About her we only have folk tales describing her idolatry and bad temper, and her nickname, *Tyrkja-Gudda*. The play in *Hallgrímskirkja* was by no means the first word of "defence" for her, nor the last one.

Scholars have long been fascinated by the Raid without conducting any serious research on it. In 1995 and 1996, however, at least four scholarly articles were published in Icelandic reviews dealing with different aspects of the Turkish Raid.[5]

When discussing the quantities of documents, art pieces and articles, the proportion of Icelandic society should be borne in the mind. Statistically, when compared with, say, the United States, the Icelandic items should be multiplied by a little under one thousand.

3. Tale upon tale

The Turkish Raid is well documented from the beginning. The original sources printed in one book make a handsome volume, 576 pages in octavo, edited by archivist Jón Þorkelsson at the beginning of this century.[6] The following three narratives are the most elaborate.

The account of *Kláus Eyjólfsson* was written immediately after the Raid and is partly based on the eye-witness accounts of the Danish merchant, captain and the crew from the Westman Islands who escaped to the mainland in a rowboat. There, they were received by lawman Kláus who also went to the islands and listened to the testimony of other escapees, some of whom were brought in from the eastern fjords by the raiders.

[3] "...nokkur ófriðar líkindi, stykkjum skotið af skipum eða bátar frá þeim að landi róa". Sæmundur Magnússon Hólm, "Westman=øe Beskrivelse", *Royal Library, Copenhagen*, Ny kgl. samling (1677) 4to.

[4] Steinunn Jóhannesdóttir, *Heimur Guðríðar. Síðasta heimsókn Guðríðar Símonardóttur í kirkju Hallgríms.* (Reykjavík, 1995).

[5] Þorsteinn Helgason, "Hverjir voru Tyrkjaránsmenn?". *Saga. Tímarit Sögufélags*, XXXIII (1995), pp. 110–134; Guðrun Ása Grímsdóttir, "Úr Tyrkjaveldi og bréfabókum", *Gripla IX* (1955), pp. 7–44; Halldór Baldursson, "Holger Rosenkrantz höfuðsmaður og atlaga Tyrkja að Seilunni 1627", *Landnám Ingólfs. Nýtt safn til sögu þess*, Vol. 5 (1996), pp. 111–120; Sigurgeir Guðjónsson, "Varnir Íslands á 17. öld", *Lesbók Morgunblaðsins* (13 April 1996).

[6] *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, edited by Jón Þorkelsson (Sögurit IV, Reykjavík 1906–1909).

When the Reverend Ólafur Egilsson returned home a year after his deportation he soon began to write an account of his experience. He started with the coming of the "Turks" to the Westman Islands, then went on to describe the voyage to Africa and to draw a picture of Algiers and finally told of his travels, amidst the perils of the Thirty Years' War, to Copenhagen and Iceland. In his narrative Ólafur limits himself to what he has actually seen, referring to other eyewitness accounts in a few instances.

In 1643, Bishop Þorlákur Skúlason of Hólar commissioned his *historicus, Björn Jönsson of Skarðsá*, to write a comprehensive history of the Turkish Raid. What Björn had at hand was the above-mentioned accounts of Kláus and Ólafur together with two other narratives, now lost, written by Einar Loftsson of the Westman Islands and by Halldór Jónsson of Grindavík. He also had access to one letter from the Barbary States and a description written by students from East Iceland.

To paint an even more varied picture of this tragic event and its aftermath we also have annals, reports, letters of different kinds, poems and legal acts. A list of all known domestic documents originating in the 17th century amounts to around 70 items. Most of them are preserved in the National Library of Iceland (Landsbókasafn), and some are in the Royal Library or The Arnamagnæan Institute in Copenhagen.

This is a formidable collection of documents around a single event. Once, there were even more. The lost accounts of the Westman Islands and Grindavík, used by Björn of Skarðsá, have already been mentioned. We can trace a few more because they are referred to in existent sources. Among them are at least seven letters from Icelandic captives in Algiers which did reach this country in addition to the four that are still preserved. One curious item was brought home by the Reverend Ólafur and is mentioned in his travel tales. This was a passport in Turkish, issued by the Algerian authorities for free passage on his way home. Once arrived, he put it on display in some way because we have a description in verse, in the *Ræningjarímur*, besides a mention by Ólafur himself. The poet describes the movement of the (Arabic) letters on the page, from the lower right-hand corner up the page to the upper left corner (however he found this out). The rhymer finished by comparing the exotic letters of the passport with the "scribble of Odin" (wherever he has seen his own handwriting).[7]

Some valuable documents concerning the Turkish Raid were burned in the great fire of Copenhagen in 1728. The great scholar and collector of manuscripts Árni Magnússon (Arne Magnæus) wrote in a desperate letter a year later that he had possessed several accounts of the raid and that he had been in the Westman Islands and written notes of his own. Almost all of this material was destroyed.

We can deplore the losses but, in fact, we should be happy over the great amounts which were written and are still preserved. By comparison, an Irish scholar has all the more reason to complain about the lack of records of the nightly sack of Baltimore in 1631. This was an event in many ways similar to the Turkish Raid on Iceland four years earlier, also carried out by "Turks", the leader being the

[7] Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627, p. 490.

same as the one in the Icelandic expedition. The documentation, however, is different.

> But no contemporary writer thought it worth while to publish a poem or even a pamphlet on the subject. Not one of those who escaped capture that night at Baltimore wrote an account of his experiences; and if any of those abducted sent home details of their sufferings in captivity, these memorials have disappeared without trace.[8]

What the historian has at hand to explore the Sack of Baltimore is one letter written in nearby Kinsale within three days of the event. In addition, he has a few lines in the contemporary *Gazette de France*, a mention by Pierre Dan, of the Order of Saint Trinity and Redemption of Captivities, in his much read *History of Barbary and Her Corsairs*[9] and the short account of the captives in Algiers by English consul James Frizell. Only two or three of the Irish captives were ever redeemed. Of the "Turkish Raid" on the Faeroe Islands in 1629 the documentation is also rather poor. A few official letters were written, some folk-tales were recorded and we still have remains of the ship that was wrecked on the cliffs of Suðuroy.

4. The abstract love of writing

The few Irish and Faeroese letterwriters seem meagre compared to their Icelandic counterparts. Why were the Icelanders such prolific writers?

Certainly not for commercial reasons. In contemporary Europe there was a market for printed publications. Reformation literature found eager buyers on the Continent so that some Catholics even accused the greed of printers for the rapid diffusion of Lutheran ideas through the printing press.[10] To grasp the different Icelandic situation, a comparable example to Ólafur Egilsson's *Travel Tales* might be cited, this time from Portugal. A seafarer returning from India was captured by the Algerines in 1621 and held in captivity until a year before the arrival of the Reverend Ólafur. Like him, he wrote about his experience. But unlike him he wrote for the market in a specific genre, or even two genres, which were popular at the time, *história trágico-marítima* and histories of captives, both of which were sold in the streets, along with cabbage and cucumbers, suspended on cords. Accordingly, this type of account was called *literatura de cordel.*[11]

In Iceland there was no such commercial market. Secular books were seldom printed until the late 18th century and, for a popular market, almost a century later. Printing had already arrived in the country in the 16th century but was mainly meant for religious texts for reasons of standardization, while it was not deemed proper to have different handwritten copies of the word of God in

[8] H. Barnby, "The Sack of Baltimore". *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archæological Society, Vol. LXXIV*, No. 220, July–December (1969), pp. 101–29.

[9] P. Dan, *Histoire de Barbarie et de ses Corsaires*, sec. edition (Paris, 1649), p. 313.

[10] A. G. Dickens and J. Tonkin, *The Reformation in Historical Thought* (London, 1985), p. 24. See also R. G. Cole, "The Reformation in Print: German Pamphlets and Propaganda", *Archive for Reformation History*, Vol. 66 (1975), pp. 93–102.

[11] J. Mascarenhas, *Esclave à Alger. Récit de captivité de João Mascarenhas (1621–1626)* (Paris, 1993). From the introduction by Paul Teyssier, pp. 7–10.

circulation. The printing press alleviated this problem so the slight difference in rituals and psalms which had existed between the two dioceses in Iceland (to name an example) was overridden by a printed psalmbook (*Graduale) in 1594.*[12]

The expensive procedure of a printed publication was not necessary for the Turkish Raid since it took care of itself, so to speak. The interest (i.e. market) was there and it only needed some willing copy hands. To copy some pages by hand was manageable in the leisure hours during the long winter season. The economic and social history of literary production in Iceland has not been thoroughly researched[13] but there seems to have been some specialization in this field. In the middle of the 18th century some people are said to have taken up copy work as an occupation[14] and a century later itinerants went from farm to farm copying texts where available and reading them aloud in exchange for bed and breakfast.[15] Of course, some elementary skills were required and a great many of the scribes of preserved documents were clergymen, officials or headmasters. Jón Þorkelsson is a case in point. Educated, well versed in Latin, counsel to bishops and officials, later head of the Latin School of Skálholt, we are indebted to him for the oldest and finest copy of Björn of Skarðsá's *History of the Turkish Raid.* His copies were made in 1744; in fact two copies, written with different techniques.[16] The original manuscript, which Jón probably had in front of him, has disappeared. Many writers and copyists were of a more humble origin and education, Björn of Skarðsá and Kláus Eyjólfsson being two examples.

What kind of urge lay behind the studying, writing and copying we can only guess at, at this stage. Foreign visitors to Iceland in the 19th century observed the zeal of the clergymen and asked themselves what "inducement ... can these solitary and secluded beings be supposed to have..." And the answer could not be fame and fortune:

> Their zeal in this respect can only proceed from the pure and abstract love of literature and science, urging them on to the exercise of their intellectual faculties.[17]

How much this analysis is applicable to the 17th century we cannot say. However, an "abstract" urge to write had been with the Icelanders for a long time and they sought support for their activity in classical European thinking. This is already the case in the so-called First Grammatical Treatise, probably written in the middle of the 12th century, where it is stated as a rule that in most countries memorable events are recorded, both domestic and foreign, and laws are registered.[19]

[12] Jón Halldórsson, *Biskupasögur Jóns prófasts Halldórssonar í Hítardal.* (Sögurit II.), Vol. I, Skálholtsbiskupar 1540–1801 (Reykjavík, 1903–1910), p. 179.

[13] At least one historian has fully realized and investigated the dynamics of handwritten culture after the invention of the printing press; H. Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1993).

[14] Eggert Ólafsson, *Vice-Lavmand Eggert Olafsens og Land-Physici Bjarne Povelsens Reise eigiennem Island...*, Vol. 1 (Sorø 1772), p. 461.

[15] See also Jónas Jónsson frá Hrafnagili, *Íslenzkir þjóðhættir* (Reykjavík, 1934), p. 247.

[16] *Royal Library, Copenhagen,* Kall 629 4to (37 pages) and Thott 1776 4to (34 pp.).

[17] J. Barrow, Jun., *A Visit to Iceland, By Way of Tronyen, in the "Flower of Yarrow" Yacht, in the summer of 1834* (London, 1835), p. 242.

[18] The First Grammatical Treatise, edited by Hreinn Benediktsson (Reykjavík, 1972), p. 206.

In the Danish monarchy this scholarly commandment was enhanced in the late 16th century by royal interest in producing national histories. Competition in this field was inaugurated between the monarchies of Denmark and Sweden, in addition to all the other fields. Royal historians were appointed. Iceland had a special role in this rivalry, on the one hand as a source of old sagas and eddas which furnished details to the kingly lineage, while on the other hand as an independent actor that wanted its own history. Bishop Þorlákur Skúlason appointed his own "royal historian", the self-educated farmer Björn of Skarðsá. According to Björn, the ambition of the bishop was to collect in writing the notable events of his day whereby Icelanders would not be the inferiors of knowledgeable men of other countries who record news and tidings in their country.[19]

Is this an abstract love of knowledge? In a way, but with a political tone. Anticipating nationalism, Björn of Skarðsá was at pains to define the special position of Iceland, in scholarship and history as well as in trade and defence (as we will see later).

Given this general context, it is only natural than such major events as the Turkish Raid should be recorded in an orderly manner.

Besides the general and the political reasons, however, there were often some personal incentives. Ólafur Egilsson's *Travel Tales* needs no explanation, he was writing about himself and his flock. Kláus Eyjólfsson acted as an official in the Westman Islands and was cousin of both of the priests there. Bishop Þorlákur was present in Bessastaðir when the Turks carried out their attempted attack and he met the Reverend Ólafur in Copenhagen on his return from Barbary. Even some of the scribes can be traced as emotionally involved by kinship or otherwise. Thus, the above-mentioned headmaster Jón Þorkelsson did not forget to mention in the title of his copy that he was the "great-grandson of captive Halldór Jónsson".[20] Historians of the 20th century would not usually start their investigation by stating their personal involvement. However, Sigfús Johnsen, an official who conducted research into the history of the Westman Islands in general and the Turkish Raid in particular, pointed out some personal connections, among them his own since he was a descendant of Kláus Eyjólfsson.[21]

Of course, not all who wrote about the Turkish Raid were directly involved. For Guðmundur Erlendsson, the author of *Ræningjarímur*, no such connection is known. He simply had the motive in life to put some words into rhyme every day. Although Bishop Þorlákur personally witnessed the activities of the Turks his historian, Björn of Skarðsá, had been nowhere near the scene. A cautious conclusion would be to state that a personal involvement gave an *impetus* to write, copy and investigate.

Having stated this, we must account for one notable exception to the rule. Hallgrímur Pétursson, a prolific writer of the 17th century and certainly the best-known Icelandic psalmist, at no time mentioned the Turkish Raid nor even the Turks in his writings. He would have every reason, so it seems, to make literary use of the sufferings of Icelanders in captivity, not least in his best-known work, the fifty

19 *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, p. 215.

20 "...af Joh. Th. Chrysorino Sonarsonar syne Halldors Jns sonar Hertekna", *Royal Library, Copenhagen*, Kall 629 4to.

21 Sigfús M. Johnsen, *Kláus Eyjólfsson lögsagnari og Tyrkjaránið í Vestmannaeyjum. 300 ára minning* (Reykjavík, 1927), p. 26.

psalms on the passion of Christ, *Passíusálmar*. Even more so since he was married, as mentioned before, to the most renowned captive of them all, "Tyrkja-Gudda". Two possible explanations come to mind; one that Hallgrímur tended to generalize in his writings, and did not use so many specific examples. The other is of a psychological nature, that the experience of his wife was too painful to turn it to a literary device in psalms and rhymes.

Finally, we might ask whether the personal involvement did bias the writers. Of course it did, but most often in an obvious manner. The invectives of the Reverend Ólafur are, in a way, natural and they do not hinder him from recording the essentials and from noting details. Actually, the non-involved Björn of Skarðsá is more subtle in his selections. One might even be tempted to say that sometimes an orderly biased author is more attentive than the ideal (non-existent) neutral observer.

5. The lure of adventure

In this chapter we look for direct political propaganda in the narratives of the Turkish Raid. Was there a need to warn against the Turks, the aggressors? Was there somebody who wanted to be ravished?

The question seems rather far-fetched but strangely enough it was on the agenda even at the centre of Icelandic society. The Synod of Skálholt diocese held in Þingvellir (Thingvalla) in 1663 took up this peculiar case. A royal letter had been received warning against a renewed Turkish treaty since England and Holland had made peace with the arch-enemy of Christendom. The royal officials proposed that Iceland should bear the costs of a defensive man-of-war that would sail around Iceland for her protection. The clergy had to furnish an answer. A letter of reply was drafted by Bishop Brynjólfur Sveinsson acknowledging the Turkish danger but envisaging every difficulty in paying the bill. The contribution of the well-to-do would never be sufficient even for the smallest of ships. And to tax the poor common people was neither practical nor wise:

> We have not the conscience to lay heavier burdens on the poor people than they already carry so they do not weary too much of their poverty and servitude and might be tempted to have them ravished for the expectations and the adventure; much is there to be wary of.[22]

No doubt, this is a justification for not paying a new tax. Even so, an argument, and even a rhetorical one, must contain a grain of truth. One of the signatories of the letter was Hallgrímur Pétursson, the husband of former captive Guðríður Símonardóttir. He hardly would have given his name to something that looked like a cynical joke.

22 "Enn vppa fátækann almvga høfum vier ei samvisku meire þyngsl ad leggia enn a honum liggia, so honum ei leydest ofmiøg syn fátækt og anaudgun, og mætte falla j þá freystni ad vera til frids ad vera hertekinn, vppa von og æfinntyr, þui margt er hier vti ad varast", *Ur bréfabókum Brynjólfs biskups Sveinssonar*, edited by Jón Helgason (Copenhagen 1942), p. 157.

The Turks had a two-sided image in the eyes of Europeans. On the one hand they were the enemies of Christianity, naturally so since they were an Islamic superpower with a foothold in Europe. On the other hand they were rich and exotic. The reformist bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson took up the question in his first printed book:

> Turks, the heathens, surely have the great glory of the world, power and wealth and abundance. But all this is transitory, worthless and ephemeral the end of which is the beginning of eternal pain.[23]

After the Raid there was a new situation. The Turks had suddenly become a close reality. Ólafur Egilsson had seen their land in the outpost of Algiers and among the invectives in his travel tales there was also praise of the city, for its cleanliness and orderly manners and for the climate – without a winter, reaping twice a year, no housing needed for sheep. Certainly this was paradise. They enjoy their blissfulness in this life but ours comes later, he said.

Soon, there was news of Icelanders who enjoyed the good life. Anna Jasparsdóttir, a young woman from the Westman Islands, married a Moorish convert and lived like a queen, clothed in silk and purple.[24] The Moor ransomed his father-in-law who was also held captive in Algiers and he was to tell the story when he returned to Iceland as would other returnees. A few other Icelanders were known to have advanced in Algerine society and most young people had converted within a few years. By force or seduction, no doubt, but anyway ... .

When Björn of Skarðsá got the assignment to write a history of the Turkish Raid, he cleaned up in his sources. No mention of Anna Jasparsdóttir. No frivolous talk of people who converted to the satanic faith of their own free will. And the seemingly positive traits of Turks and Barbary were explained properly. The cleanlineness is not enjoyed by all, Björn insisted; the main square in Algiers is washed every day only because the king lives nearby, he said. Ólafur had written that the Turks were cheerful and kind to the children on the voyage to Barbary. Björn may have thought this was being too charitable and he added an interpretation: They do so to seduce the children to their evil faith.

Let us not exaggerate the lure of adventure. For most Icelanders captivity in Barbary was a misfortune. Even if they survived the often harsh treatment and diseases, they were usually uprooted from their families, friends and religion. To be sure, as captives they were generally better off and better treated than their counterparts on European soil.[25] Moreover, the young people adapted more easily. What it meant, however, to be deprived of their parents at a young age (even though not all were) we can only surmise.[26]

23 "Tyrkjar, heiðingjar, hafa að sönnu stóra heimsins dýrð, makt og ríkidæmi og alla vellysting, en allt er það stundlegt, fánýtt og fallvalt, hverra hluta endalok að er upphaf eilífra kvala." Cit. in Páll Eggert Ólason, *Menn og menntir siðskiptaaldarinnar á Íslandi.* III (Reykjavík, 1924), pp. 724–725.

24 "...klædd J pelle og gullegum purpura...". Statement by Erlendur Asmundsson, the Westman Islands, June 20, 1636. Guðrún Ása Grímsdóttir, "Úr Tyrkjaveldi og bréfabókum", p. 25.

25 This is the conclusion of, e.g., Friedman, "Christian Captives at 'Hard Labor' in Algiers, 16th–18th Centuries", *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 13 (1980), pp. 616–632.

26 An intelligent study of the history, psychology and ethics of slavery around the world is O. Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death. A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1982).

6. A call for arms?

The Turkish Raid was a military attack on a country that was virtually defenceless. What lessons did the writers draw in this respect?

In short, we can state that the conclusions were of two opposites natures. Björn of Skarðsá belongs to the militant faction and he is quite explicit in the preface to his *History of the Turkish Raid.* Icelanders should have weapons and defence as becomes every people and every country.

> It is disgraceful and absurd for young and healthy men in this country neither to possess weapons nor know how to use them when the danger is imminent that they may be taken and tied up like inert orphans, or their parents or women and children before their eyes. Certainly the lords and rulers of this country should observe this fact.[27]

Björn was critical of the governor's decision in Bessastaðir not to attack the corsairs when their ship was stranded with the captives aboard. So were others who were present or who later described the incident. One of them was Jón Ólafsson Indíafari who in his old age had his memoirs written.[1] He had some experience as a gunman in the royal Danish navy and in Bessastaðir he wanted to bombard the corsairs in order to free the captives. His arsenal, however, was limited to one or two old cannons. A few inexperienced Icelanders were facing a hard core of professional fighters. Besides, firing at the corsairs' ship would have endangered the captives. Governor Holger Rosenkrantz's decision not to attack and to be prepared to flee from the scene was more an act of realism than of cowardice.[29]

Another realist and a man of the world was Arngrímur Jónsson the "learned" who had written books in Latin in defence of Iceland against foreign slander.[30] When Bishop Guðbrandur Þorláksson died in the year of the Turkish Raid, Arngrímur served as *officialis* of the diocese of Hólar. In a missive to the clergy he had to evaluate the situation after the Raid. He knew the map of the world and noted the open sea from Africa to Iceland. The heathens would not have to touch upon any land on their way to Iceland, he argued.[31] Arngrímur did not count on the help of King Christian IV "who is more than busy in resisting and fighting the

[27] "Óvirðing og fásinna er það fyrir unga og hrausta menn hér á landi, að eiga hvorki vopn né kunna þeim að beita, þar slíkt kann á að liggja, að þeir séu teknir og bundnir sem ómagar aðgerðalausir, eður og foreldrar þeirra, kvinnur og börn fyrir þeirra augum. Sannlega væri yfirherrum og stjórnendum landsins hér að gætandi", *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, p. 218.

[28] Jón Ólafsson, *The life of the Icelander Jón Ólafsson, traveller to India, Written by himself and completed about 1661 AD with a continuation, by another hand, up to his death in 1659.* Translated from the Icelandic edition of Sigfús Blöndal by Bertha S. Phillpotts. Works issued by the Hakluyr Society, Sr. 2, No. 53 (London, 1923).

[29] This view is defended, with even more arguments, by Halldór Baldursson, "Holger Rosenkrantz höfuðsmaður og atlaga Tyrkja að Seilunni 1627."

[30] Arngrímur Jónsson, *Brevis commentarius de Islandia*, (Copenhagen, 1593). A later edition with English translation was published in London in 1598 in Richard Hakluyt's *The Principal Navigations. I.* Parts of this book were printed in different editions and in the 20th century the Latin original has been published twice and an Icelandic translation in 1993.

[31] This may be geographically correct but not politically viable. Holland and the British Isles were an intermediary on the corsairs' way in more than one sense. This will be elaborated on a later occasion.

power of Rome".[32] There can be no other protection or defence than God Lord Almighty, Arngrímur concluded.

This is not the conclusion of a "softy" since Arngrímur was a rather stern Lutheran who, among other things, advocated the abolition of church sanctity for offenders. On his part it is *realpolitik* based on the assumption that Iceland was not militarily defendable. These views also partly reflect an opposition to too much royal involvement and to new taxes for defence expenditure.

Besides these motives, there seems to have existed an idea of a peaceful country, an ideal which was worth preserving even after a military attack. Bishop Oddur Einarsson described this in some detail in 1590. He asked God to keep the blessed peace this country had enjoyed for centuries while most other people lived in dissension and hatred. Without any actual defence we have seldom been attacked except for some raids by pirate scoundrels, he added.[33]

These words can be regarded as a description, a manifestation and a prophecy which even a military invasion of the magnitude of the Turkish Raid could not alter. The pastors and officials who wrote poems and psalms after the Raid advocated the Lord as their sole protector. So did the Synod in the Skálholt diocese in 1663, as mentioned before. A tiny war vessel would mean little against the evildoers of this world, the clergymen said, and therefore they "appealed to the mercy of God the Almighty for our defense and protection".[34]

Some men of the church sought to use less orthodox methods, such as casting spells on the raiders with their poems. This was not a military solution either but a belief in the power of the written word. "... the sword of the spirit will cleave asunder/the souls and lives of heathen men...", wrote one anonymous poet.[35]

Well aware of the Thirty Years' War in Europe, educated people in Iceland appreciated the peaceful (albeit cold) climate of their motherland and were not ready to join the war club, not even after the bitter lessons of the Turkish Raid.

7. The religious lesson

The main lesson of the Raid was a religious one. In his preface to his *History of the Turkish Raid* Björn of Skarðsá enumerated seven religious reasons for writing and the lessons to be drawn from it before going to the eighth (secular) one, that of defence. Ólafur Egilsson wrote his *Travel Tales* in 27 chapters, each ending with a meditation and Bible quotation. His first two chapters and the last one provide the religious framework for the remainder. Very few of the 70 documents which are our sources for the Raid are without religious references.

Typically, the "enlightened" scribes of the 18th century erased most of the religious framework to get straight to "pure" narration. Luckily, a few were enlightened enough to keep a good part of it for the sake of truthfulness. Out of 34 preserved copies of Ólafur's *Travel Tales* only one contains the last chapter and the

[32] "...hefur ærid j fangi ad standa og strijda vid þa Romver(s)ku magt", *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, p. 368.
[33] Oddur Einarsson, *Íslandslýsing* (Reykjavík, 1971), p. 143. The Latin original was published by F. Burg, *Qualiscunque Descriptio Islandiae* (Hamburg, 1928).
[34] *Úr bréfabókum Brynjólfs biskups Sveinssonar*, p. 157.
[35] "...sverð andans í sundur sker / með sál og lífi heiðna menn...", *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, p. 498.

first ones and even here only in a grossly summarized form. Björn's preface is kept in two copies only, both written by headmaster Jón Þorkelsson, as stated before. This aversion to the religious interpretation of the Raid tended to continue. When archivist Jón Þorkelsson printed most of the documents in 1906–1909 he published two versions of Ólafur's travel description and he thought it fit to put the "religious" one in a second class (B), even though he admitted it was the most faithful to the original. What motivated him to do this was that he was bored with Ólafur's "religious snobbism".[36] However, Jón was enlightened (and positivist) enough to print both versions.

Was the religious interpretation snobbism? Modern historians have tended to be sceptical of belief and to look instead for "the real thing" behind the religious "glaze", whether it is economic interests, class conflicts or other ulterior motives. Lately, however, a counter-reaction has arisen among historians who have taken the religious writing seriously.[37] Of course, making the distinction between inner conviction and outward rhetorics, between "dead formula" and "reality" is not always easy to make.[38] There may be some justification in saying, with Martin Schian (1912), that preaching in Lutheran Orthodoxy was without power and life since "die Predigten nicht im Herzen des Predigers geboren, sondern von ihm höchst kunstvoll gemacht ... wurden".[39]

The narratives of the Turkish Raid, though, should hardly be categorized as harshly as this. There are differences, however. Björn of Skarðsá is obviously not as devout as the Reverend Ólafur. His "secular" lesson, that of the need for weapons, is more detailed and more emotional than his seven religious teachings. Björn draws the religious–political conclusions, Ólafur the inner-devotional.

What, then, were the main religious guidelines in analysing the Turkish Raid? Not suprisingly, it was to see it as God's punishment for human sin. This is in line with church teaching, Catholic and Protestant, for many centuries. The foundation was laid in the Garden of Eden with the original sin of Adam and Eve. Luther more or less followed in the footsteps of his predecessors although he made some amendments. According to him good deeds did not lead you on the heavenly road. Only the sacrificial death of Christ and the true faith of the individual could mean salvation. Jean Delumeau has called Christianity "une théologie du péché"[40] but he maintains that the insistence on sin, *contemptus mundi*, death, and so on, was highlighted between, roughly, the Plague and the Enlightenment. Plagues, natural disasters, syphilis and the Turk were all part of God's plan in this respect. Although

[36] "Guðsorða fordild", *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, p. 91.

[37] A good example of this, in a Nordic context, is a thesis on peasant revivalism and secularization in Denmark and Sweden 1820–1850, H. Sanders, *Bondevækkelse og sekularisering. En protestantisk folkelig kultur i Danmark og Sverige 1820–1850* (Stockholm, 1995).

[38] S. Lindholm, "Överste Christoffer Johansson Ekeblad en fromhetstyp från 1600-talet", *Kyrkohistorisk årsskrift*, Vol. 46 (1946), p. 51. Lindholm studied a Swedish colonel of the 17th century who left an enormous amount of letters, copies of verses etc., mostly of religious nature, and concluded that in spite of a "tiresome monotony" the basic religious outlook in his writings was his own at the same time as it was in accordance with traditional orthodoxy.

[39] Cit. in A. Beutel, "Lehre und Leben in der Predigt der lutherischen Orthodoxie. Dargestellt am Beispiel des Tübinger Kontroverstheologen und Universitätskanzlers Tobias Wagner (1598–1680)", *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*. Vol. 93, No. 3 (1996), p. 431.

[40] J. Delumeau, *Le péché et la peur. La culpabilisation en Occident (XIIIe–XVIIIe siècles)* (Paris, 1983), p. 211.

strange to most modern people, this interpretation could be psychologically helpful in putting almost unbearable events into context and giving them meaning. Seeing a purpose in one's suffering makes it a little easier to bear.

In practice we can see how the writers tried to adapt the dogma of sin to the Turkish Raid. Even the devout Ólafur had his moments of doubt about the merit of suffering. Too much and too long-lasting grief only brings evil recompense, he wrote. But the Lord is sure to bring comfort with joy after the cross of adversity, he hastened to add and everywhere in his description he sees God's guiding hand and His grand scheme: "...God lays the cross so that His blessed name be praised and honoured ... The cross is laid upon the faithful so you do not think that you are innocent ..."[41] Kláus Eyjólfsson, too, himself not a man of the church, thinks that God has gone too far in His punishment since innocent people had hardly been so cruelly treated before, not even in the destruction of Jerusalem. One comfort is that the wrath of God is not eternal. With repentence He will come to our rescue.[42]

The question was bound to come up why some were captured or killed while others escaped. Man is sinful, the Icelanders are sinners – but what of the inhabitants of northern Iceland who went unharmed while the people of the Westman Islands suffered? Two of the versifiers thank God for not having punished the whole country. We have sinned no less than they, one of them says, and let us repent so that a similar reprimand will not descend on us soon.[43] Bishop Oddur Einarsson expressed similar thoughts in a letter written immediately after the Raid. Repent, he wrote, for otherwise God may be forced to send another or even worse disaster upon this miserable country.[44]

This is all natural, but rhymer Guðmundur Erlendsson goes a step further and deeper into the sinfulness of the islanders. There is talk, he says, that people in the Westman Islands had led the *dolce vita* before the Raid. They did not listen (the rumour says) to their prophet, the Reverend Jón Þorsteinsson, who after the *English* raid in 1614 had warned his flock of a greater revenge if they did not show penitence.[45] Guðmundur is open-hearted enough to confide his secret thoughts: "Lead away and call shame upon sneaking thoughts that God was not as pleased with these islanders as with us."[46] There, he has said it! What was gossip had now found its way into a written poem, to the delight of a historian trying to understand the mentality and culture of different strata and individuals of the 17th century.

The Turkish Raid in Iceland took place in a period generally referred to as Orthodox Lutheran. In Delumeau's words a whole age was preoccupied with the macabre, death and destruction.[47] Concerning the Icelandic sources under discussion here, this is hardly the case. The "Turks" are of course despised and condemned but only in one version of Kláus Eyjólfsson's report are their evil deeds described in what might be called a sadomasochistic way.[48] Certainly, nowhere is

41 *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, pp. 197–198.
42 *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, pp. 73–74.
43 *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, p. 504.
44 *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, p. 359.
45 *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, pp. 482–483.
46 "Leiðum burt og löstum það, sem lundin býður, / að hafi drottni hugnast síður/heldur en vær sá eyjar lýður", *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, p. 483.
47 J. Delumeau, *Le péché et la peur*, pp. 108–161.
48 *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, pp. 74–90.

there a sign of understanding, or even an attempt at understanding, the Islamic faith.

Usually, however, the tone is surprisingly mild, also in a poem written by the Reverend Jón Jónsson of Melar, where he deals with the murder of his father and abduction of his mother, brother and sister. He is confident that the evildoers will weep bitterly later and he even reckons that if they sincerely repent they will be exculpated for the sake of Christ. This is an extreme case of mildness. But it is in line, so it seems, with Bishop Þorlákur Skúlason's theology, which in practice advocated compassion, as can be seen from his letter-book, in cases such as retardation, handicap, mental illness and suicide.[49] He gave a positive response, on behalf of the clergy in the Hólar diocese, to the call for collect and tax to ransom Barbary captives. He wanted his flock to see them "as if you were limbs of the same body".[50] This is quite different from the answer of his colleague Bishop Gísli Oddsson of Skálholt. His saw every difficulty in imposing a tax for this purpose; the money would be slow in reaching to its destination, he said. "Those we want to ransom might be dead by then. But those who eventually would be redeemed were of no loss anyway."[51]

All in all, the religious vein of the "Turkish" writings is in concordance with the Protestant theory of the period. The religious leaders of Iceland were educated in Copenhagen and several of them had scholarly ambitions. Bishop Oddur Einarsson enjoyed Tycho Brahe's teaching for a while and his colleagues, Þorlákur Skúlason and Brynjólfur Sveinsson had an extensive correspondence with Professor Ole Worm. The scholarly interests of the two last-mentioned were so deep that they only reluctantly accepted the mantle of a bishop, Brynjólfur only after a persuasive discussion with King Christian IV and his advisers.[52]

At the same time the religious interpretations reveal some pecularities. The mildness of the tone is apparent and the variations are more extensive than expected. These are preliminary conclusions which call for a more thorough study of the different shades of religion – the key to an understanding of mentality and culture in the 17th century.[53]

8. Concluding remarks

An investigation of the Icelandic sources for the Turkish Raid in Iceland in 1627 is a necessary prerequisite for further research on the event itself. At the same time the sources cast light on the way individuals and society consciously dealt with a catastrophe of this magnitude.

[49] *Bréfabók Þorláks biskups Skúlasonar.* (Heimildaútgáfa Þjóðskjalasafns I:) (Reykjavík, 1979).
[50] *Bréfabók Þorláks biskups Skúlasonar*, p. 76.
[51] "kann skie þa sieu dauder þeir sem vær villdum leysa. Enn hiner um sijder leysest sem eingenn aptur siar er ad", *Tyrkjaránið á Íslandi 1627*, p. 413.
[52] A history of the bishops of Skálholt and Hólar was written at the beginning of the 18th century; Jón Halldórsson, *Biskupasögur Jóns prófasts Halldórssonar í Hítardal. (Söguirit II.), Vol. I, Skálholtsbiskupar 1540–1801 (Reykjavík, 1903–1910), Vol. II., Hólabiskupar 1551–1798 (Reykjavík, 1911–1915).*
[53] This is convincingly attempted with regard to the scientist Tycho Brahe in Wittendorff, Alex, *Tyge Brahe* (Copenhagen, 1994).

We have found that one of the ways in which Icelanders learnd to cope with the disaster was by writing about it and even by the sheer *quantity* of handwritten records. This could be called collective therapy. Part of the therapy was to put the deviation into known patterns of life where religion was the main framework. The position of Iceland as a defenceless country had to be redefined with the conclusion (of most writers), however, that the peaceful image of the country was not to be sacrificed. This was considered as one of the merits of the country even though most writers had no illusions about its harsh nature. In comparison, the Barbary States of North Africa were bountiful in a material sense so a warning against the lure of adventure had to be included in the writings. One important pattern for understanding the terrible event was to see it as God's punishment for human sin. This was of some comfort although it posed new problems about the worthiness of victims and escapees.

Handwritten narratives passed down in numerous versions from farm to farm and from generation to generation describing human atrocities as a deserved punishment of God – a sign of a primitive society? In this article elements of a different interpretation have been presented – that the "scribal publications" of the Turkish Raid in Iceland show a dynamic use of the written word in a literate community responding to crisis in a resilient way.